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ABSTRACT

The Regents Testing Program of the University of Georgia system establishes minimal standards of literacy for graduation from any of the 30 institutions in the system. The testing covers language skills basic to all of the academic areas, and instructors in the composition courses must follow a prescribed syllabus that requires a certain number of exercises which stress paragraph and essay writing. A student wishing to acquire an undergraduate degree in the Georgia system must pass the test which consists of a section on reading comprehension, finding errors in a passage, and the writing of an original, impromptu essay. Knowing what is expected of them as teachers of composition, the English faculty should now do a more thorough and detailed job of preparing students. (RB)

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE COMPOSITION PROGRAM: IMPLICATIONS OF THE REGENTS TESTING PROGRAM OF THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM OF GEORGIA

A Paper Presented by Huey Allen Owings

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College officials and faculty members from other parts of the United States, yes, even from other parts of the world, are taking a keen interest in and are formulating plans for developing their own versions of the Regents Testing Program of the University System of Georgia. So far the test consists of just a language skills portion, but rumor has it that tests will also be added in other disciplines as soon as they are devised and agreed upon. The stated purpose of the present testing program is to establish minimal standards of literacy for graduation from any of the thirty units of the System. But the English faculties at these same thirty units perceive the program as just the beginning of "Accountability in Georgia." Since language skills are so basic to over-all performance in academic areas, we reason, therefore, ours is the first discipline to be subjected to scrutiny. The Regents have not devised a tool whose primary goal is to judge minimal student performance but one which gauges primarily teacher, departmental, even institutional effectiveness, many of us are inclined to think. If such is our perception of the function of The Test, then the entire program is rank with implications concerning the nature and function of our Freshman Composition courses in the future. Already here at West Georgia, where I serve as Director of Freshman English, we have gone from a free-wheeling, literature centered course, in which students wrote an unspecified number of themes, which were graded according to the whim of the individual teacher, to a highly structured composition and usage skills course, one in which each teacher is to follow scrupulously a prescribed syllabus that requires a certain number of exercises, a certain number of paragraphs of

and a certain number of fully developed essays of specified variety.

specified variety. Our English faculty, however, still does not feel that we have gone far enough. There is strong support within the department for adding a second course, remedial in nature, to deal with usage, mechanics, the elements of the sentence, and aspects of the paragraph. The question that I am constantly plagued by is, "How can the English Department at an open-door school such as ours prepare students better so that they can perform well in all writing situations, not excluding that of The Test?" In other words, how can the members of the English Department at West Georgia show the taxpayers of Georgia that the tax dollar is being wisely spent on English teacher salaries? So far, since the beginning of the testing program, West Georgia has not especially looked good. Will heads roll? Will there be mass firings of scholarly Ph.D.'s in medieval studies, linguistics, and the Renaissance, so that they can be replaced with M.Ed.'s expert in remedial work? Such suggestions have been made. But let me briefly discuss The Test before I continue with my analysis of its implications. Perhaps the mere act of describing The Test and the mechanics of its administration and scoring will suggest some measures that we at West Georgia can take to better justify our incomes to the Georgia citizenry.

Any student wishing to gain any type of undergraduate degree, even any of the several associate two year degrees, at West Georgia or at any of the other units of the University System of Georgia must now take and pass The Test. He may take it as many times as are necessary, but if he is to receive his diploma, he must, at a single sitting, pass it in its entirety. It consists of a section on reading comprehension, one involving finding errors in usage, and one requiring the writing of an original, impromptu essay. The entire test is timed, thirty minutes being allowed for the writing of the essay. Students normally take the test upon completion of their first 45 quarter hours of college work, each unit of the system having a testing coordinat who administers the examination at the beginning of each new quarter. The coordinator then mails the tests to the Educational Testing

Laboratories at the University of Georgia, Athens, where Dr. Robert Rentz, Coordinator of the Regents Testing Program, supervises the computer grading of the objective portions of the examination. His staff also secretly codes the essays, assigning a different number for each of the institutions in the system. The essays are then distributed to the seven regional scoring centers spread across the state, where English instructors from the various institutions in the seven regions gather on designated Saturdays, usually two per quarter, to grade. The number of graders assigned to a particular center is in proportion to the number of essays to be graded by that center. Here at West Georgia, one of the centers, we usually grade 350 papers per Saturday. Our center has seven graders, six of our own faculty and one instructor from a nearby junior college. Each of us receives thirty dollars per Saturday. Dr. Rentz has discovered that the average instructor can grade 135 essays during a grading session of approximately four hours. Such a seemingly large number is possible because of the "wholistic impressionistic" method which we employ, in accordance with a model essay comparative method. The graders, or raters as they are referred to within the University System, are instructed to read each essay quickly to gain an overall impression of its quality in relation to three model essays and to assign a rating based on that comparison. Three graders judge each essay independently in this manner in order to insure reliable results. The concept of this scoring system does not require a grader to thoroughly evaluate a paper analytically or mark it but merely to compare the paper with pre-selected models. (Sample models are included under Appendix A, B and C.) The graders read each essay

quickly to gain a general impression of its quality in relation to the model essays and to assign a rating based on that comparison. This wholistic approach contrasts with the analytical approach which is usual in freshman theme grading, but evidence developed by Dr. Rentz indicates that wholistic grading is much faster and produces more uniform results.

The essays are rated on a four-point scale in which "1" represents substandard performance and "4" represents highest quality. The model essays represent border-line cases; each paper to be graded must fall above or below a model. One model essay represents each dividing line. A paper better than the "2/1" model and worse than the "3/2" model would be rated a "2." The Regents Sub-Committee on Testing, a sub-committee of the Academic Committee on English, has defined each of the four levels as follows:

(1) The "4" theme clearly and effectively states a thesis that relates directly to the assigned topic. The theme concentrates on this central idea and has a clear overall organizational plan. The major points in the theme are developed logically and are supported with concrete, specific evidence or detail that will arouse the reader's interest. The theme should reveal the writer's ability to select effective, appropriate words and phrases, to construct and organize sentences and paragraphs, to make careful use of effective transitional devices, and to maintain a consistent, appropriate tone. The theme should also be free from mechanical errors.

(2) The "3" theme should have a clearly stated central idea, which is logically and adequately developed, and it should contain most of the qualities of good writing itemized above. The theme generally differs from the theme which would be assigned a "4" in that it shows definite competence, but lacks real distinction: The examples and details might be pertinent, but not particularly interesting or sharply observed; the word choice might be consistently accurate, but seldom--if ever--really felicitous.

(3) The grade of "2" is assigned to those papers which meet only the basic criteria, and those in a minimal way. The essay must present a central idea with sufficient clarity so that the reader is clearly aware of the writer's purpose, and the organization must be sufficiently clear for the reader to perceive how the author plans to achieve that purpose. The theme should offer some supporting evidence or details to substantiate the points that are made, but these may be rather scant. The theme should clearly indicate that the writer has some sense of what a sentence and a paragraph are and that he can generally use words accurately. The essay will probably contain several mechanical errors, but they should not be of sufficient severity of frequency to destroy the sense of what the writer is saying or to persuade the reader that he is dealing with an illiterate.

(4) The theme which receives a "1" indicates the author's

failure: (1) to state and develop a central idea; (2) to have an organization which is indicative of an overall plan; (3) to deal with the assigned topic; or (4) to avoid serious errors in diction, sentence structure and paragraph development.

In addition to the models the Sub-Committee on Testing of the Committee on English has also defined essay evaluation criteria to be used. These are shown in outline form below:

I. Organization (40%)

A. Narrowing the subject
B. Evidence of a thesis
C. Development of the thesis

1. Unity
2. Logical development
3. Coherence
4. Evidence

II. Rhetoric (40%)

A. Diction

1. Clarity
2. Variety
3. Precision
4. Consistency

B. Sentence Structure

1. Clarity
2. Variety
3. Economy
4. Parallelism

C. Paragraph Structure

1. Unity
2. Logical Development: appropriate emphasis
3. Coherence

D. Point of View

1. Appropriateness
2. Consistency

III. Mechanics (20%)

A. Spelling
B. Punctuation
C. Usage
D. Vocabulary

Ironically the Sub-Committee on Testing calls this a test designed to measure the competency of college students in areas of reading and writing; the committee states that the test is developed specifically to provide state-wide information on the status of student competence in these areas and to provide a uniform means of identifying those students who fail to attain minimum levels of competence. On the contrary, we in the English Department at West Georgia College view the examination as a test of our judgments and of our effectiveness as teachers of basic language skills and as a potential tool of the administration. Like many other rurally situated liberal arts colleges, West Georgia is now experiencing a radical drop in enrollment. Reduced student enrollment ultimately must mean a reduction in faculty. We have lost one position already this year and are threatened with the loss of several more in the future. As Director of Freshman English, I have the chore henceforth to meet with each student who fails the test to discover, among other data, who the student's English teachers have been. When the ultimate decision to rehire or release comes, the administrators may well look at my data, observing carefully how well the teacher's students have performed on the Regents

Test.

The matter of continued employment, obviously, is one of, if not the most crucial implications of the Georgia mode of accountability in regard to teachers of composition. Yet there are also positive implications. I am enough of an Educationist to appreciate the need for goals and objectives in teaching. The Test and the explanatory materials provided by Dr. Rentz in a format not offensive to Traditional English Departments, such as ours at West Georgia, give teachers of composition clearly stated guidelines to follow as they structure their courses. Though not an English teacher himself, Dr. Rentz and his staff have given a single, important purpose to Freshman English, the development of the skills of clear, effective, interesting writing. Our Academic Dean and Vice-President has responded to The Test by insisting that good writing is not just the responsibility of the English Department but of all departments and that The Test is not just an evaluation of the English Department but of all departments. Greater stress on good, clear writing from all quarters of the college faculty, then, should be a positive effect of this new program.

Knowing what is expected of them as teachers of composition, our English faculty should now do a more thorough, more detailed, and better organized job. Frequent cancellation of class "because the weather is just too nice" or because "that conversation over coffee in the teacher's lounge or the student center was just too stimulating" will probably end. The use of the class as a source of "bull-sessions" or as a captive audience for the release of personal, social, economic, religious, sexual, or political views will probably be discontinued.

The teacher will realize that he has a body of facts and skills to impart to his students and that he will have to demonstrate the extent to which he has been successful when they are examined by The Test.

Unfortunately, I also foresee ill-effects of such a test, of accountability. That wonderful, jovial, curious, weird, balding Dr. Smith, who never bathes and who never wears a change of clothes, who, though extremely knowledgeable in the field of composition, even its minutest details, sometimes forgets to discuss those details and to return papers, but who has exerted an enormously profound influence on hundreds of students during his thirty years at West Georgia, will perhaps not measure up so well when his thoroughly inspired students take The Test. Miss Smythe, his spinster cousin who spent a summer in England and changed the spelling of her name thereafter, will, especially since she has managed to make complete copies of all six versions of The Test, be able <u>To Prepare</u> her students for The Test, all six versions of it, in fact. She will graciously accept the praise of the Department Chairman and the Director of Freshman English, as well as the nice little congratulatory letters sent out by the President and the Dean. Dr. Smith will be carefully leafing through the annual listing of job opportunities put out by the Modern Language Association, willing to accept less pay at some private school not concerned with accountability, some private school still appreciative of the unique contributions such people as Dr. Smith can make to the lives of students.

Potentially The Test can effect the entire curriculum of the English Department. It will not just affect Dr. Smith or just cause

Miss Smythe to indulge in unprofessional acts. I foresee a demand for uniformity, closer supervision, and greater rigidity in relationships between teachers and students and between one teacher and another. There will be departmental examinations in reading, in usage, and in composition. Freshman English will become a skills course, nothing more, There will be no time for a Dr. Smith to give part of himself to his students. There will be no time for the sharing of ideas. Misses Smythes from high schools from across America will flock to West Georgia for job interviews as a weary Department Chairman and an even wearier Director of Freshman English attempt to find replacements for that medieval scholar, now somewhere in Iowa at a Quaker school; that Renaissance scholar, now at a Catholic school in the Boston area; and that linguist, now working as a dispatcher at Miami International Airport.

Dr. Smith does not have to leave; nor do the linguist, the medieval scholar, or the Renaissance scholar. If West Georgia and the other units of the University System of Georgia exercise the collective intelligence that they possess, then The Test can serve as a means for the improvement of instruction in composition. It need not result in competition between schools to show up best. It need not result in unethical, unprofessional behavior on the part of individual faculty members. If The Test is used as a statement of the Behavioral Objectives in the Cognitive Domain, then Dr. Smith, if he will just be a bit more attentive to that domain, can continue to concern himself primarily with the Affective Domain and still keep his job.

Meanwhile I, as Director of Freshman English, must intensify my search for more effective methods of teaching basic skills in usage

and composition, so that I can share them with my colleagues. Fortunately, another department is held accountable in the area of reading comprehension.

Appendix A

Topic #6 Model #4/3

The "generation gap" most certainly exists. However, this is no new revalation nor is it peculiar to contemperary society. The lack of respect for elders and for the mores of society was bewailed by Socrates. The generation gap has always been with us and, in all probability, will always be with us.

Today's generation gap is made more evident by the mass media and the books of noted psychologists, who have perceived that any work on inter-personal communications is a veritable gold mine. Also in evidence, is the growing trend among the young to stand up and speak out for what they believe in.

People of the older generation seem to have developed a blind spot about their own youth. They remember only that they did not march and demonstrate for peace, civil rights, or for reforms in the government. What they manage to forget is that they did not always agree with policies set by their elders and their government. They did not agree but they did not protest. They were a depression and war generation and are now, as they were then, concerned with maintaining the status quo for everyone except themselves. They are of the "what's in it for me?" generation. In order to maintain their shaky equilibruim, they have embraced many of the very policies that they fought to save the world from in the 1940's. They pass strict laws against the use of marijuana, and other drugs, not making a comparision between today's youths' reaction to the narcotics laws and their own laughter at the futility of enforcing the Volstead Act and the days of bathtub gin and bottleg whiskey. They protest the welfare payments and food stamps given to the unemployed, but which of them ever protested against

the soup kitchens and bread lines of the Depression Era?

The younger, the "atomic" generation, those who have grown up with the knowledge that any day can be the last, not only for them, but for the entire world, cannot be expected to accept, without question, the values of those who shaped the world we live in today. They are, on the average, more informed than their parents and they want to know "why?" "Why." This word is the crux of the generation gap. The very sound of the word infuriates most of the older generation. "Why are we in Viet-Nam." "Why is marijuana illegal?" "Why are some people treated as less than human because their skin is a different color?" The "atomic" generation no longer accepts "Because that's the way things are." as a legitimate answer. They say, "If that is the way things are, they need to be changed.

The leaders of the nation have not helped the situation by lying to the people. To most young people, honesty is "where it is at." They will trust you and believe in you until the first time they catch you in a lie and then your veracity in anything is subjected to grave doubt.

Quite possibly, communication can help to close the generation gap. But it must be honest communication and must be based on the willingness of both generations to change and to compromise.

Appendix B

Topic #6 Model #3/2

There is, in fact, a generation gap between the young people of today and the older generation of their parents. Furthermore, there has always been a distinctive difference between the generations of parent and child. This is due to the different perspectives from which each group views each situation of life.

The parent speaks and feels from experience and a deeper understanding of the nature of things. He can recall his experience with issues similar to those which his child encounters. However, he cannot retain the vividness, the novelty, and the challenge which each encounter holds for his child. He views each situation with an awareness, though often an unconscious one. It is this awareness which separates the adult from the child.

The young person, on the other hand, is actually beginning to discover life and all that it offers. He is impatient and determined to experience all he can at the earliest opportunity. He is living life, perhaps in a closer relationship to life because he is a part of it, not simply because he is aware of it. He wants to experience each situation himself and set up his own values. He insists on making his own decisions, for these decisions and inherent values will be the basis for his decisions as an adult.

In my own experiences, it is evident that there are situations in which there is a definite generation gap. However, I feel this gap has been created as a result of opposing attitudes not necessarily linked to a difference in age. There have been few instances in which teachers, ministers, and other adults have regarded my opinions and personal

decisions as invalid simply because I lack the set achievements which, they feel, must precede any form of maturity. These persons fail to see the importance of the gradual process in which a young person learns to reason, to decide for himself, and to assume responsibility. They fail to realize that my generation will be tomorrow's adults.

On the other hand, I have shared a great number of relationships in which each person has been recognized as a person, capable of making decisions and assimilating his own values. In this type of relationship, there has been a great extent of interpersonal communication and a genuine respect for each other. Each has assumed responsibilities which must accompany maturity.

The so-called generation gap is, in fact, a generalized gap between individuals. It does exist, but I have found that through developing an honest relationship with the other individual, the gap between us has become relatively insignificant.

Appendix C

Topic #6 Model #2/1

Does a "Generation Gap" exist today?

What is a "generation gap?" A generation gap is the lack of communication and lack of wanting to communicate from one age group to another. The "gap" grows out of the environment, the culture, and the parental up-bringing of the individual. A teenager's environment, way of life, and his own parents are entirely different and are slanted toward different goals than his own parents. This is due mainly to the constantly changing times, which encuse morals, money, and goals of attainment.

From my own experience, that is, from my home life; yes there is a gap due to the age of difference. My parents are in their late 50's and early 60's, while I'm only 20 years old. They have no conception why "young kids," as they call us, want to go out and get drunk, raise hell, and grow long hair. However, now that it is agreed that there is a gap what are the deep rooted reasons?

My parent's roots or goals are completely different from my own. My parents both grew up and had their college days during the 1929 depression. Consequently, a stinginess for money and a wanting of security has been instilled in them, which has been bumping and irritating me, since I have been brought up in a time where the standard of living is high and bread lines and meal stamps are unheard of. Another great change between my parents and I, is the way they had their fun or how they spent their liesure time as compared to me. In the late 1920's again due to the depression leisure time was usually spent working or in line waiting for food. Now in the age of teenage night clubs, drive-ins, walkins, and the necessity, the car, young

people have more things to do and experience plus more time to do it in, than their parents.

Therefore, although a "Generation Gap" does exist, and it can be detremental to both banks of the "gap," from my own experience it does not have to be an object of constenation as long as both sides see the "gap."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I am indebted to Dr. Rentz and his staff for the many explanatory papers that they have printed pertaining to the Regents Testing Program. Much of factual material in this paper was extracted from those works. The model essays, included under Appendix A, B, and C, are actual models produced by Dr. Rentz's staff and followed by the graders.

Addendum

Appendix D

Dr. Frances Ondee Ravan, Assistant Professor of English at Georgia Southwestern College, Americus, another unit in the University System, did her doctoral dissertation by examining the validity of the wholistic grading procedure. She wanted to know whether the wholistic and analytic methods of essay evaluation result in a judgment of the same components of writing or whether the two methods judge different criteria of writing. She found that her two groups of graders, one using the wholistic method, the other using the analytic, both judged the students' work on the same components of writing ability. Though, in some cases, the anavtic evaluation resulted in lower essay and rank scores than did the wholistic method, the results of the analytic procedure placed the forty essays used in her experiment in four ranks of essay quality, just as the analytic method did. Her study indicates that the wholistic procedures do result in an evaluation of the essays in terms of the components of writing ability as determined by the Sub-Committee on Testing and as exemplified in the models used. She concluded that her analytic study validates the wholistic procedures presently being used to evaluate the essays in the Regents Test.

Ravan, Frances Ondee. An Analytic Study of the Essay Test of Language Skills Examination in the Georgia Rising Junior Testing Program, a dissertation. The University of Georgia, 1973. Pp. 109-110.